Marcellus Wiley on Life After Football

The former NFL star talks about his latest projects and why choosing Columbia was the right decision.

By Rebecca Shapiro  |  Spring 2019
When Marcellus Wiley ‘97CC was a senior in high school, he had to make a decision that he knew would shape the trajectory of his life. As a star athlete and California All-Conference standout in both track and football, he had scholarship offers from some of the country’s top collegiate sports programs. But Wiley was also an A student and a member of the National Honor Society (“I was even a national typing champion,” he says. “Eighty-two words per minute!”). An acceptance letter from Columbia College sat on top of his pile.

“I thought very hard about going to one of those football factories, the schools churning out professional players,” Wiley says. “I mean, let’s face it: Columbia doesn’t exactly have a yellow-brick road to the NFL.”

The stakes were high for Wiley. He grew up in Compton, California, a city notorious for gang violence. His first concussion came not from football but from teenagers jumping him on the playground when he was in elementary school. He was lucky to have supportive, present parents who encouraged his interest in athletics, but money was tight, and he says his family bought most of their groceries with food stamps.

“Like other athletes from the inner city, I knew that playing professionally could change my family’s circumstances,” he says. “But I also knew that the average NFL career only lasts three years. I needed a degree that was going to work for me when I was done playing football.”

Wiley’s football career ended up lasting significantly longer than most — he spent ten seasons in the NFL and was twice named one of the league’s top fifty players. Since he retired from the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2006, he has become a successful television sports commentator and author. For eleven years, Wiley cohosted ESPN’s SportsNation and the network’s radio show Afternoons with Marcellus and Travis. In 2018, he left ESPN and joined Fox Sports as cohost of the daily sports talk show Speak for Yourself. “I’ve had a career that I didn’t even know how to dream about when I was a kid,” he says.
Wiley plays for the Lions on November 12, 1994. (Columbia University Athletics)

This past October, Wiley released his memoir, *Never Shut Up*, which chronicles his unconventional path to the NFL and how his sociology degree from Columbia set him aside from his peers in the league. The book is also an unflinching look at the darker side of professional athletics. In 2014, Wiley added his name to a lawsuit that accused NFL teams of illegally providing narcotics and other controlled substances to players, in the hopes of keeping them on the field through injuries. Wiley, like thousands of other players, was left battling an addiction to painkillers long after he stopped playing.

“People always ask me if I hope that my three-year-old son will play football like I did. That’s definitely not my first choice,” Wiley says. “And if he gravitates there, I want him to understand that it comes with a price.”

Wiley has devoted significant time and money to education and philanthropy. He runs a charitable organization, Project Transition, which provides leadership training
to teens in underserved communities, and works as an ambassador for several other organizations devoted to similar causes.

Recently, Wiley also partnered with Columbia’s School of Professional Studies to develop Sports Industry Essentials, an online certificate program designed to help people launch careers in sports management. Wiley established a scholarship fund for the program, which he hopes will help expand access to people from places like Compton.

“So many people dream about being a professional athlete,” Wiley says. “That’s not always realistic, but there are other ways into the industry. I had the foresight when I was eighteen to understand what a Columbia degree could do for me. Now I’m able to extend that opportunity to other people.”

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